

Chester Twp. mayor to head 'Smart Growth'
He's 2nd Republican named by Corzine
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BY Tom Hester
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Chester Township Mayor Benjamin Spinelli has been named acting director of the state Office of Smart Growth, an appointment that will lead him to resign after nine years as mayor following the May 15 council meeting.

Spinelli becomes the second environmentally friendly Republican from the Highlands area of northern New Jersey to head the Corzine administration's Office of Smart Growth. He has been with the agency for the past year as counsel and policy director, a position he took after resigning from the Highlands Council.

"For the past year, Ben has been an integral part of the Office of Smart Growth," Community Affairs Commissioner Susan Bass Levin said in a statement yesterday.

Spinelli replaces former Republican Lebanon Township Mayor Eileen Swann, who stepped down as director last month to become the \$121,000-a-year director of the day-to-day affairs of the Highlands Council.

Swann earned \$98,000 as Smart Growth director, but Department of Community Affairs officials said Spinelli's salary is still being negotiated.

In his new job, Spinelli will play a role in the formation of the state master plan for the preservation and development of the Highlands, an 800,000-acre region contained within seven counties -- Sussex, Morris, Hunterdon, Somerset, Warren, Bergen and Passaic. The plan is intended to protect the water supply of over 5 million people. Three years ago, the Highlands Coalition presented him with its 2004 Champion of the Highlands award.

"His experience in environmental protection and smart growth principles make him an ideal choice to head up the division as we continue our efforts towards well-planned, well-managed growth that adds new homes and creates new jobs, while preserving open space, farmland and environmental resources," Bass Levin said.

Spinelli could not be reached for comment but he issued a statement.

"I believe in the mission of this office to help plan a sustainable and prosperous future for New Jersey," he said. "Working with our partners at the state, county and municipal level and with our talented staff on the important issues that face our state is an incredible opportunity that I am honored to have."

Asked why the Corzine administration selected two Republicans to oversee the Office of Smart Growth, Morris County Freeholder Jack J. Schrier, the Highlands Council vice chairman, said, "Probably because Ben and Eileen have been strong supporters from day one of the preservation of the Highlands."

"Smart Growth must review the development and conservation proposals that will ultimately go before the State Planning Committee," Schrier said. "He will play a role in determining whether growth proposed for the counties fits the term smart growth and the Highlands planning area and preservation area."

Assemblyman Guy Gregg (R-Morris) opposes the Highlands plan.

"Obviously, the mayor took a very pro-preservation stand in the Highlands debate and so did Eileen Swann," Gregg said. "When those appointments were made by the governor, I have to assume he wished to show some level of bipartisanship."

Spinelli is the former chairman of the Morris County Open Space Trust Fund and the Chester Environmental Commission, served as president of the Raritan-Highlands Compact, and was a member of the New Jersey Conservation Foundation-Black River Greenway Advisory Council. He also served as a trial attorney for Chubb Group Insurance Companies and Wald & Del Vento and was Essex County assistant prosecutor from 1984 to 1986.

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